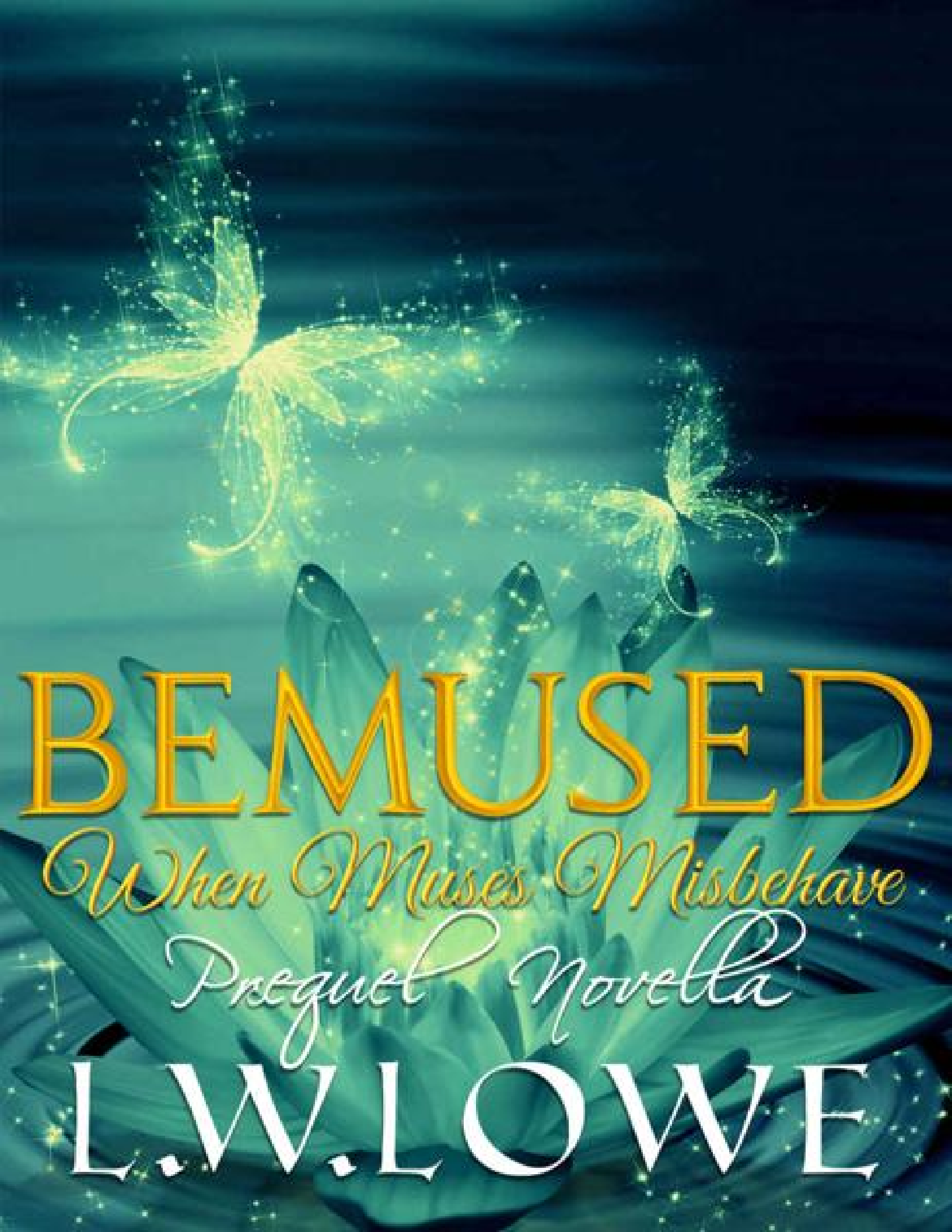
BEMUSED
When Muses Misbehave
Prequel Novella
L.W.LOWE

Bemused

When Muses Misbehave: A Prequel Novella

L. W. Lowe

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A Letter From The Muses

Dearest Readers,
You are cordially invited to our villa where you can sign up for LW's newsletter. That way you can receive updates on our adventures in the series When Muses Misbehave. Please RSVP at http://www.lwlowe.com for these notifications.

We look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,
The Muses

P. S. No plot bunny has been harmed in the production of this series. They might have been kicked around or tossed about, but those suckers bounce like fluffy rubber balls. Trust us, they're fine.

Chapter One

Once Upon An August Afternoon,

Along The Oregon Coast…

A spotted owl slept among the branches of an aging fir tree. The steady sea breeze blew through the woods, rocking the tree with a gentle rhythm. But all it took was a hint of smoke to wake the bird from its pleasant nap. The owl's dark eyes widened as overgrown tufts of green, burned with a circle of searing white heat. Then a rumble deep from within the earth shifted pebbles and leaves. In a violent crescendo, an ivory column erupted from the ground and scared the bird into safer corners of the forest. The mysterious column split apart, creating an ivory arch over their crowns. Carved into the arch were the words: Home of Hedone, Goddess of Pleasure.

The space between the columns flashed with a blinding light and a woman emerged from the doorway. She wore a purple gown that swirled down to her ankles and her blonde waves lay against large iridescent butterfly wings. "Anyone there?" Hedone waited and listened as her wings retracted into her shoulders. No one answered. She reached into a pocket, pulled out several silver coins, and held them in her palm. "Casual clothes."

The coins dissolved into a cloud of silver, then she swept one hand across the gown. Her one-shoulder formalwear became a set of khaki pants, knee-high boots, a black turtleneck, and a white puffer vest appeared in her hand.

As Hedone slipped on the vest, she looked around the area. "So far so good." Hers was the only gate around, but that wouldn't last for long. The other Greek Mythics were due to arrive soon. She returned to the ivory columns and pressed her palms together. The columns converged into one.

Then she pushed her hands downward, and the column sank into the earth, as if it was never there.

Hedone left behind the trees and walked across the gravel parkway, where The Birches's Village Café waited. She skipped up the steps of the cedar deck that held six large tables, then peered through a window. Across the reception area and inside the dining hall, a waitress wiped down the tables. She had her brown hair with tips dyed red, tied in a loose bun on top of her head.

Perfect. The early birds had finished eating dinner, then tottered off to the casinos down the road. Hedone offered another silver to the aether. "Reveal the Unseen." Her body tingled from the silver cloud that shimmered all around. Then she charged into the restaurant and called out. "Hello."

The waitress jumped in surprise, then wiped her hands on the tea towel draped over her shoulder. "Sorry, we're closed until six o'clock."

"I know." Hedone walked through the reception area into the dining hall and held out her hand for a shake. "Harmony, right? I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Donna Cupid. I used to work here a couple of years ago. Barb might have mentioned me?" Hedone held her breath and hoped that some memory might break through the fog inside the waitress' mind.

Eventually, Harmony's frown became a polite smile. "Yeah, I think I do." The waitress grasped Hedone's outstretched hand. "Hard to forget a name like that. It's been a while. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing great." Hedone was only a little disappointed but happy if she stirred a memory or two from Harmony's subconscious. "I was in town and wanted to pop in for a bit. See how the place is holding up. And it looks like The Birches are doing fantastic."

"That they are." Harmony continued with her cleaning, while Hedone followed. "They added a patio in the back and plan on expanding the menu."

"Sounds great. So, any big plans this evening?"

Harmony shook her head. "As far as I know, it's going to be a quiet evening, but check with Barb and Darius."

"That's a good idea." Hedone made her way past the tables and toward the manager's office. "How is Mr. Birch's mood, by the way?"

"Hah!" Harmony veered in the direction of the kitchen. "Same as always. Don't give him too much sugar and stay out of his soufflé."

Two more waitresses, Cynthia and Jan, were in the office with the Birches as they discussed the menu changes for the week. Their rapid fire conversation carried right through the door. Chuckling, Hedone knocked and poked her head through the open door. "Hey, Barb, how's business?"

Darius and Barbara Birch looked up from their menus. A great big grin crossed Mr. Birch's face and lifted his hands in surprise. "Hey, Donna, welcome back!"

Barb let out a happy squeal and hopped out of her chair. She wrapped Hedone in her trademark bear hug that rocked the recipient like a baby. "So good to see you, my dear girl."

Hedone gave Barb just as big of a bear hug. "My family and I were passing through. This weekend is their anniversary, and I was hoping to reserve a table for my parents tonight as a special present."

Barb pinched Hedone's cheeks. "Not a problem."

"You are having dinner here?" Mr. Birch clapped his hands together. "Excellent! You are a good daughter." He bounced away happily to the kitchen where he shouted orders at the prep cooks. "Look alive, we have special guests tonight, Donna Cupid and her parents."

The prep cooks poked their heads out from behind the galley. One pulled off his hair net and ran his fingers through his dreadlocks. "Donna, do you plan on sticking around later tonight? If you are, we can go out for drinks after my shift ends."

"Put the damn net back on, you numbskull, and wash those hands." Mr. Birch pulled him away with an uproarious command. "You have much to answer for. Look at my pots. They have burn spots on them and they should not be there. That means you're burning the soup. I will have your hide if I find you have burned my soups or any of my sauces for that matter."

Mrs. Birch sighed as her husband went on his usual rampage. "Anyway, Donna, we've got lots of room, especially since we opened the pergola in the back."

Hedone shook her head. "Not this time. I was hoping for a table in a quiet corner. But if any surprises should happen and you need an extra hand, I am more than happy to help."

Mrs. Birch waved away Hedone's offer. "Don't worry about that, honey. It should be fine. You go pull out a card and choose whichever table you want. The girls will make sure other guests are seated elsewhere."

"You are the best, Barb!" And Hedone went straight to the concierge stand and pulled out the special reservation cards. She jotted down.

Mr. and Mrs. Cupid

Then she neatly folded the place card and put it on her special table. For a few years, Hedone waitressed for restaurants up and down the U.S. west coast. She always chose a special corner table where she sat couples on the verge of falling in love. Hedone nurtured a ton of romantic vibes into those corner tables. With those aces, her west coast matchmaking jobs became so much easier. The Goddess of Pleasure took a moment to look around the restaurant and admire all the changes made since she introduced the once dying café to Zeus and the other Mythics.

There was a stage large enough to fit a live band with the tables rearranged for a dance floor. That was her suggestion before she ‘left' her waitressing job. Hedone wasn't sure whose idea it was to expand into sheltered outdoor dining, but it was brilliant.

Hedone was about to check out the patio when she caught sight of a twinkling butterfly drifting through a closed window. The blue and white patterns on the butterfly meant it belonged to Mnemosyne. Hedone wasn't the only Mythic on the premises anymore. A kaleidoscope of butterflies appeared and dispersed throughout the restaurant. The staff stopped in their tracks and marveled at the rare specimens. Hedone walked toward the reception area where Harmony stood entranced by several butterflies. One landed on her nose and burst like a bubble. Harmony's eyes sparkled. Then the lights in her eyes dimmed, her smile of wonderment disappeared, and the waitress carried on with her task. Darius and Barb followed suit, as did the rest of the staff. None of them would remember the night, only that they made a lot of money. Once the mortals had their minds submerged into soft hypnosis, the rest of the butterflies flew through the windows and swirled into the sky.

One butterfly had the gall to fly for Hedone, but she wagged a finger. "You know better than that." It sheepishly floated away and joined the others outside. She walked out of the reception area and onto the deck. In the gravel parking lot stood a woman with dark corkscrew curls that draped

down her back, and she wore an iridescent dress of blue and green. Hedone called out as she strolled across the parking lot. "Afternoon, Mnemosyne!"

Mnemosyne, Titaness and Goddess of Memories, directed the cloud of butterflies like an orchestra conductor. At their mistress' command, the sparkling butterflies rose into the sky, swirled above the restaurant until they coalesced into a ball, then burst like a firework. A dome of blue covered the property in a delicate bubble of protection. If any prying mortals inside or outside wandered upon the area, their eyes would glaze over, and their memories would be adjusted. That was how Hedone ‘lost' her friendship with Harmony, but it was a small price to pay if it kept The Birches's café alive.

Mnemosyne lowered her arms, then bowed her head in greeting. "Hello, Hedone. You're here early."

"I could say the same for you. How come we're having another party? We were here three weeks ago. Hades sprung the invitation so fast, I had to reschedule some of my workload to tomorrow."

"Yes, we were." Mnemosyne smoothed both hands over her dress, which transformed into a sweater set and denim skirt, more befitting the Pacific Northwest weather. "The invite was unexpected, but a dinner party out of the blue is a nice distraction. Everyone is so stressed right now."

Hedone folded her arms and sighed. "No kidding. I reserved a table this time. It sucked sitting next to Pan."

"Smart move. Although, I've seen Dionysus and his crew messing with seat assignments. I'm sorry to say those poor waitresses can't keep Mythics out of trouble." Mnemosyne cupped both hands to her mouth and shouted into the woods. "You can come out now, girls." Her daughters, the Nine Muses, came bounding through the gate hidden among the trees. They carried instruments and dragged several large cases on wheels onto the loose gravel. The sisters politely nodded in greeting as they walked past Hedone.

Then a loud ringing came from the office phone. "Uh-oh, here they come." Hedone turned on her heels and ran for the restaurant. "Please excuse me, I have to protect my claim." She left Mnemosyne and the muses behind and headed for the office.

Barb answered the phone in her normal voice. "Birches's Village Café." Then she let out a happy shout. "Why hello there, Mr. Z. Of course we have

room. No, fifty guests shouldn't be a problem. More like sixty? You are always welcome. And you're fifteen minutes away? We should be fine. See you soon, Mr. Z."

Barb hung up the phone, burst through the office door and bellowed. "IT'S MAGIC TIME!" It was as if Barb hit the red alert button and the staff scrambled to prepare for their guests. None of them questioned the madness recently dropped on them.

Hedone popped around the corner. "Need an extra hand, Barb?"

"Absolutely. The uniforms are over there." Mrs. Birch pointed to the boxes behind the desk. "Help yourself, then straight off to prepare the tables and start seating people as soon as they arrive."

Hedone saluted. "Yes, ma'am." Once Barb was out of sight, the goddess dug out some more coins from her pocket and exchanged her clothes with a perfect replica of Harmony's uniform. After throwing her hair into a ponytail, she joined the other waitresses and fell into the work routine.

They moved in different directions, cleaning, adjusting, and setting the tables. As Hedone made her rounds, she lit any forgotten candles and placed utensils perfectly wrapped in cloth napkins. If anyone noticed Hedone didn't use matches or carry a tub of utensils, no one mentioned it and merely continued their hurried preparations. She moved to the stage and tossed a copper coin offering in the air. The curtains drew open, and the lights activated.

Every time Hedone crossed paths with Jan, Cynthia, or Harmony, she waved a glowing hand behind their heads then pocketed the coins that appeared. When she stepped into the kitchen, Hedone was extra careful not to draw too much from the men, especially Mr. Birch. Harvesting belief from men made them extra stressed, and Mr. Birch needed a lot of energy to survive nights like these.

Hedone walked outside onto the deck where Mnemosyne sat in an arbor porch swing. She offered a cold bottle of sparkling water to the older goddess. "Keeping an eye out for the parade?"

Taking the water, Mnemosyne nodded her thanks. "Someone's got to collect the money until Hades arrives."

"Speaking of which." Hedone pulled out the bag of the harvested coins from her pocket. "Here you go, enough to cover for three. And spread the

word that I already harvested belief from the staff. They are to be left alone for the rest of the night."

"Why bother, dear? You're an Elite like your parents. Do a direct withdrawal from the aether. It's more efficient. If my daughters could, they would."

"Maybe." Hedone clasped both hands behind her back. "There's more value in raw belief. Besides, I prefer to draw from the aether for emergencies."

"Very well, to each their own. Ah and here comes the next sucker- I mean donation."

At the far end of the gravel road, a new gate the size of a semi-truck burst through the dirt and pebbles. A few seconds later, a black pickup truck drove through the gate and down the road, then parked at the tree line. Hedone was surprised to see the Titan, Prometheus, at the wheel with Hephaestus riding shot gun.

Prometheus stepped out of the dusty truck, then waved at Hedone and Mnemosyne. "Afternoon, ladies."

In a camo rain jacket and jeans, Hephaestus paused in his snake-skin boots when he saw Mnemosyne. "Uh, hi."

"My Lord Hephaestus, long time no see." Mnemosyne wiggled her fingers in greeting and gave him a suggestive wink. Hephaestus blustered as he nervously scratched his beard. Then he dropped a bag of coins into Mnemosyne's hand, and he marched into the restaurant.

Hedone looked over at Mnemosyne. "Like playing with fire, don't we?"

The Goddess of Memories answered Hedone's question with a smirk. "If Aphrodite can't see gold that's right under her nose, then she doesn't deserve him."

Then Prometheus stepped up and gave Mnemosyne his money. "Hey, Donnie-girl, nice to see that you're here." With dusty jeans, a stubbled goatee, and a plaid flannel shirt, Prometheus had all the vibes of a lumberjack. Too bad he recently relocated to the hot and dry desert instead of the Yukon.

"Good to see you, Mr. Prometheus. Allow me to find you a table." As she escorted him into the restaurant, she lowered her voice and asked. "How is the desert treating you? Everyone settling in at your new place?"

"Yeah, it's great. Love that dry heat." Then he cleared his throat to whisper. "We're adjusting. It's rough some days, which is to be expected when you move a teenager from a big city and drop them into a desert wasteland. So far I've set up tutors for her until things get smoothed over."

"It's only temporary. I'm sure her mother will figure out something." Hedone peered into the dining hall where Hephaestus sat. "In the meantime, you and Heph better get used to co-parenting together." They glanced at the God of Blacksmiths, who had a pint of craft beer in one hand and munched through a basket of breadsticks. Hedone gestured toward a grouping of tables beside the bay windows. "Take your pick. The ones to the right have the best ocean views."

Prometheus nodded. "Thanks."

When she returned to the deck, Hedone caught the lights from a gate hidden among the trees. Demeter and Hestia emerged to be welcomed immediately by Mnemosyne. More gates started popping up like mushrooms. While the woods disguised most of the incoming guests, The Twelve Gods and Goddess of the Pantheon never failed to make a grand entrance and prove their status to the little Mythics. Hedone wondered if they were ever going to tire of their parade.

Zeus and Hera didn't bother with gates. A lightning bolt hit the terrace and the King and Queen of the Gods walked out of the smoke, then relished the applause. Instead of using the woods or parking lot, Poseidon arrived on the beach with a bevy of sirens and sea nymphs at his side. Hades and his wife, Persephone, stepped out of a gate with pillars of black-and-white marble. The moment Demeter saw her daughter, the goddess left behind the others and rushed to embrace Persephone. They immediately walked into the restaurant, chatting the entire way.

While the other waitresses rushed to seat the more prestigious guests, Hedone made sure to seat Demeter and Persephone at a nice table for three in Harmony's section. Despite Hades' reputation as a skinflint, Persephone had a way to make him leave nice tips. When Hedone returned to the deck, Hades and Poseidon had sequestered themselves to a quiet corner, slowly drinking their beer and leaning against the wood railing. Unlike the other big-wigs, Hades looked worried, more gaunt than usual. And Poseidon kept glancing at the sky as if a meteor was about to hit the coast.

Something was up and Hedone wanted in. She slowly worked her way in their direction, carrying her tray and offering refreshments from one Mythic to the next.

Hunched over the railing, Poseidon looked over at his brother. "So how come we're having another fundraiser?"

"The Pit is due to gobble up the last of Tartarus' stockpile in three months." Hades stared at the ground, then had another sip of beer. "And I'm running out of options."

"Zeus know?"

"Yup."

"Hera?"

"Yup."

"Shit."

Hades' large shoulders drooped. "I hate being the numbers guy."

Hedone stopped right behind them. "Refreshments, sirs?" Both gods straightened, and angry red aura surrounded their bodies. When they turned their glowing eyes upon her, one set blue and the other gray. Hedone gulped, held up the tray with fresh cold beers to the furious gods. "On the house, sirs."

Poseidon grimaced, then looked at Hades. "If this fundraiser doesn't work out, it will become everybody's problem."

The angry glow died from their eyes. Then The God of the Sea and the God of the Underworld took her offering and dismissed her with a wave.

"Okay." Hedone tucked her tray under one arm as she made her escape and whispered to herself. "Let's stay out of trouble for the night, Hedone."

The rest of the Pantheon arrived with little fanfare and made themselves comfortable outside on the deck or the rose garden. Athena and Hermes sat on either side of the front entrance. Apollo and Ares arm wrestled at one table on the cedar deck. It was a gauntlet of sorts. A major player in the Pantheon met any Mythic that emerged from their gate and encouraged to donate before they entered the establishment.

After Pan jogged out of his gate, more satyrs stampeded through and immediately began their search for the nymphs. The moment Pan saw a couple of dryads inside the rose garden, he preened his goatee and made a beeline for them.

Luckily for the dryads, Hades blocked the leader of the satyrs and glared down at him. "Donations, please."

Grumbling, Pan reached into his waistcoat, then dumped a couple bags of gold into Hades' palm. "That should cover everyone. Happy?"

Hades deepened his tone. "I'll be even happier if you and the rest of the horny bobbleheads promise to keep your behavior PG tonight."

The satyr snorted. "You're no fun." Then Pan's eyes lit up when he saw Hedone in uniform and trotted right for her.

Hedone hoisted her tray like a shield. "Back off, this is not a maid café."

But Hades snatched the satyr by the shirt collar and dragged him along. "You, sir, get a special escort."

After Hedone finished seating another set of sirens, she checked the wall clock and peered out the windows. Her parents were not likely to arrive for another hour. They had a heavy load of bounties this morning. It seemed no matter how many bounties her parents finished, more letters arrived.

The Love and Romance business had been tense since more and more letters had been delegated to The Erotes. A few years ago, Hedone offered to add some of those letters to her workload. It was meant to relieve pressure from her parents and her father's siblings. Matchmaking was supposed to be a temporary gig, but it slowly took over her schedule like morning glories encroaching on a bed of daisies. Hedone longed for her regular work of experiencing and documenting all the pleasures the mortal world had to offer.

After Hedone refilled her tray with more refreshments, she returned to the deck in time to see Hermes stand from his bench. He adjusted his newsboy cap to shield his eyes from the sun. "Do you hear something?" He directed everyone's attention to the growing cloud of dust in the distance.

A snow-white coupe thundered down the road with the song Don't Get Me Wrong blasting from the speakers. The car came to a screeching halt beside Prometheus' truck and covered the other vehicle with a new layer of dust.

As the ocean wind cleared the air, everyone could see the emblem of a gold dragon with one red eye twinkling against the white paneling. The driver's tinted window slid down to reveal a woman with dark shoulder-length waves and cat-eye sunglasses.

"That one still hasn't got the goddess memo," said a nymph with sea-green hair and pearl earrings that dripped to her shoulders. "Proof that marrying up doesn't always work." An obnoxious string of giggles erupted from the other nymphs.

Most goddesses didn't mind nymphs. Artemis adored them, almost to a fault. In Hedone's opinion, nymphs were such flighty, unreliable creatures. Some were witty, loving, and even delightful. Then there were the catty obsessive nitwits, who never failed to show up for parties. Hedone frowned at the giggling nymphs as she walked across the gravel to greet her mother.

Psyche peered out of the coupe and tipped her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose. "Hedone, you're here already?"

"Of course! I wanted to surprise you and baba. But looks like I'm the one thrown for a loop. Why didn't you take a gate?"

"Aw, well." Psyche, Goddess of the Soul and former mortal princess, shut off the engine, then slid both palms over the wheel. "My last bounty was in Portland. So, I borrowed a car and drove here. Nothing like a road trip down the coast."

"Especially in a racer!" Hedone bent at the waist for a better look inside. "Hell of a car. What's it called?"

Psyche pushed the sunglasses to the top of her head. "The Dragon's Eye, a dwarven-tech prototype, apparently."

"Bitchin." Hedone poked her head through the open window to admire the leather interior and dashboard. "It's been too long since I had a racing gig. Can I take it for a spin later?"

Laughing, Psyche gently pushed her daughter's head back outside. "What part of ‘borrow' did you miss?"

Hedone ran her hand along the roof and imagined speeding down the highway. "If this evening goes well, you and baba can go on your anniversary early. Then you'll need someone to return this baby safe and sound."

"That confident, huh?" Psyche dangled the red key fob in front of her daughter. "They're expecting to see it in the morning. Follow the runes to Dwalinson Custom Auto, Beaverton."

Hedone snatched the car key before her mother changed her mind. "Got it! If you would follow me, ma'am, your table awaits." She unlatched the driver's door and held it open. "So how come baba isn't with you?"

"He'll be along, eventually." Psyche stepped out dressed in black jeans, checkered sneakers, and a grey sweatshirt that slouched off her tanned shoulder. As they walked back, Hedone caught a glimpse of more nymphs pointing at them through the window.

"Wait a second, mama." Hedone circled Psyche and made a show of judging her mother's clothes. "No, that outfit won't do." She didn't bother with coins but tapped into the aether until her fingertips glowed with belief. Then she hovered her hands over Psyche's shoulders, then swept them away. The sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers disappeared and were replaced with a slinky satin dress of deep plum and matching kitten heels. "Much better." Then she directed her mother onward. As Psyche walked up the stairs to the deck, Hedone twirled a couple of fingers over the dark hair and the tresses swirled into a prim french twist.

Psyche paused, gave Hedone an irritated glance, then continued forward. She curtseyed to each of The Twelve Gods, before presenting her donation.

"Relax." Hades directed Psyche's attention to Hedone. "Your daughter covered you and Eros. Have a lovely evening."

"I see." Psyche nodded to the God of the Underworld and walked inside. As they entered the dining hall, the goddess muttered, "Thank you, but you didn't have to do that. Was there something wrong with how I looked?"

"No, well…" Hedone fumbled for the words, then flourished an arm to lead her mother toward the reserved table. "Nothing wrong with getting a little glammed up. Admit it, you do feel better." She snuck a peek at the sea nymph who had a sour frown on her face. Hedone certainly felt better.

Psyche stopped in the middle of the dance floor. "Stop lying."

"Fine," blustered Hedone. Then she hooked an arm around her mother's elbow and pulled Psyche toward the reserved table. "It still irritates me that other Mythics think you're not good enough for baba. Just because you were born a mortal."

With a soft laugh, the Goddess of the Soul patted her daughter's back. "Sweetheart, being mortal is an advantage over mythical creatures."

"There are some who don't believe that." They reached their table and Hedone pulled out the chair for her mother.

Psyche sat down, then smiled at her daughter. "It doesn't matter what they believe, literally. Mortals can exist without myths, while Mythics die

without belief. Plus, getting belief out of a mythic is like robbing a bank. You can try, but I wouldn't recommend it."

"Good point." Chuckling with her mother, Hedone spent a copper for a carafe of ice water and filled the water goblet. "So how was your day?"

"A bit rough in the morning." Psyche leaned back in her chair. "But by some miracle, your father and I finished today's bounties early. I suggested we go home and relax. Then Himeros showed up and your father volunteered his extra time to help. I couldn't convince him to return home, so I refused to go with him."

Hedone placed the water goblet on the table. "But the bounties will end up taking twice as long without you."

Psyche propped up a fist and rested her cheek on it. "Yes, it will."

Great, so her father was running late for their special dinner, and her mother was angry for being dumped for work. Not a good start to the evening.

Shrill feedback echoed through the restaurant and drew everyone's attention to the stage. A muse with pink, purple, and blue streaks in her blonde hair shouted an apology, and the crowd returned to their socializing. the Nine Muses had changed into matching white and silver-lined outfits and were in the middle of preparing for the talent show. The Muses were on a winning streak. They had taken home seven trophies, and Hedone expected tonight to be their eighth win. They were the team to beat.

Their mother, Mnemosyne, relaxed as she watched her daughters warm up. They had pushed three tables together to create one long banquet table to fit all ten of them. When three muses jumped off the stage, Mnemosyne twisted in her chair. "Where are you going, girls?"

"We're gonna go check if there's new music in the karaoke machine," replied the muse who had her green hair pulled into a high ponytail.

The muse with chestnut curls similar to her mother's hair paused long enough to press a quick kiss on top of Mnemosyne's head. "We need ideas for the next talent show."

Hedone made a quick bow to her mother. "Please excuse me, ma'am. After the sirens played merry hell with the karaoke machine, Mr. Birch went nuts. If we're going to get any good food tonight, I must avert a disaster." And she headed for the stage.

"The selection is ridiculous." The blonde with streaks of color in her hair tapped the glass on the karaoke machine. "All these songs are from the same four artists. There's no Kylie Minogue or Bruno Mars, not even Stevie Wonder. That's practically a crime."

"Time to fix that." The muse with chestnut curls typed in more artists. "Kylie, Bruno, Stevie…"

"Don't forget Billie," added the green-haired muse.

The brunette paused. "Holiday or Eilish?"

"Both. This music list sucks harder than a twenty-dollar whore."

Hedone opened her mouth to yell at the troublemakers when someone flew past and beat her to them. "What?"

Calliope, the eldest of the muses, pinched the ears of the blond and brunette, then drew them away from the karaoke machine. "Stop messing with their equipment. It's not like we need the karaoke music." To Hedone's relief, the tall brunette steered her sisters to the other side of the stage.

"That was helpful." Before returning to her mother's table, Hedone heard a flurry of whispers and a few squeals came from the parking lot. The message flowed from the deck and throughout the cafe.

"Looks like The Erotes are here." Hephaestus lifted his mug of beer toward the crowd. "Someone dig out the smelling salts before the nymphs start hyperventilating." Then he let out a thunderous burp.

"Damn it, I should've been out there." Hedone jogged across the dining hall, then squeezed her way through the cluster of nymphs, satyrs, and dryads that clogged the reception. Once past, she huffed and tugged down her vest, then marched forward to greet two of her father's siblings, Ditus and Hymie.

"What a mob!" Hedone exclaimed as she walked toward the two Erotes. Hymie, The Erote of Marriage, looked smart in his gray houndstooth ensemble. And Ditus, Erote of Androgyny, was stunning in a pale yellow three-piece suit.

"Sorry about that, sweetheart." Hymie was the first to meet her and gestured at the crowd. "We tried to be inconspicuous."

She blew a raspberry and waved away her uncle's concern. "Don't worry about them. I can handle that lot."

"Are there still good tables next to the dance floor?" asked Ditus.

"Only if we hurry." Hedone gave each a quick hug before escorting them inside. While Hymie gave Hades the donation for him and his siblings, Ditus and Hedone pushed together a couple of tables, much like the muses' table on the other side of the floor.

Hymie pulled out a chair to relax. "Thank you, Hedone. Better go get your father before he gets inundated by those crazy nymphs. He's on the north side of the café."

"Yes, sir." Hedone dashed out of the dining hall, but this time took the shortcut through the kitchen. "Excuse me, coming through. Sorry, Mr. Birch." She slipped out the back, past the delivery van, and made a sharp right into the far end of the parking lot. Just out of view of the reception and cedar deck stood a simple gate and the words ‘Thessaloniki, Greece' carved into the arch above the columns.

Eros, Cupid and leader of the Erotes, was the last to exit the gate. The breeze played merry hell with his blond curls, but he still turned to gaze upon the ocean waves. In his white business suit and massive wings, he stood out among his siblings like a Lamborghini among Porsches. Every Mythic knew his dazzling smile hid a mischievous spirit that vexed even the mighty Zeus. Despite his faults, she admired how her father was generous with his time, especially for family.

"Baba!" Hedone slowed down and greeted her father with open arms.

"Pumpkin, I didn't expect to see you out here." Eros closed his gate and pulled his wings into his shoulders, before meeting his daughter for a big hug. "You should be inside with your mother."

"Not this time." Hedone proudly presented her uniform. "I volunteered to help the staff and tonight is all about you and mama."

"Ah, that's nice." Eros scratched the blond curls at the back of his head. "I should do something special. Your mother was in a bad mood earlier."

"To say the least. Where did everybody else go?"

Eros waved toward the vehicles at the other end of the parking lot. "The moment they saw the truck and coupe, they were gone."

"Typical." Hedone moved toward her wayward uncles. "Okay, you freshen up and I'll get them. Ditus and Hymie are already settled inside."

As she trekked down the gravel road, Hedone heard Pothos' voice echo from under the hood of Prometheus' truck. "I'm thinking of getting one of these."

"Sure you are." Anteros, Erote of Love's Revenge, pulled his brother away from the truck's engine, then slammed the hood shut. "You're always thinking. If you want it, just get it." He wiped the dirt from his palms onto his already crusty jeans. While Eros was Aphrodite's son, Anteros was the dirty blond twin whose chiseled features and dark attitude favored Ares.

Pothos, Erote of Longing, ran a hand through his dark hair and scrunched up his nose. "Eh, maybe tomorrow." Hedone shook her head as she drew closer. Pothos was no doubt a son of Dionysus, complete with a white tank top, tropical print shorts, and a laissez-faire outlook on life.

Meanwhile, Hedylogos, Erote of Flattery and Sweet Talk, and Himeros, Erote of Lust, circled the racer like hungry wolves. Hedy pushed his red hair from his eyes to get a better look inside the tinted windows. He wore his standard white tee and black leather jacket. Not that he needed more with that bright hair. Hedy always stood out. Meanwhile, Himeros had changed his hairstyle again. This time his brown waves were shaved at the sides with blue tips on the loose ends. The blue matched his rocker t-shirt and shiny vinyl pants.

"Impressed?" asked Hedone.

Himeros leaned against the trunk and ran his hand over the rear spoiler, as if massaging baby oil over a supermodel's thighs. "You bet. Who brought the coupe?"

"Mama, of course."

Hedone almost laughed at how fast Himeros jolted forward, folded both hands behind his back, and gave her a sheepish grin. "Right."

"So, what do you think?" came a voice behind her.

Hedone turned, then gasped to see her father with a dozen red roses and dressed to the nines in a black tuxedo. "Too much, baba! You know better than that." She pulled the jacket off him, opened the top two buttons on his shirt, then grabbed the bouquet of roses. Hedone tossed aside most of the flowers but returned one red rose.

Then she dragged him by the elbow, past the pouting nymphs gathered on the deck, and escorted him and his brothers into the restaurant. Hedone directed her uncles to their table but refused to let her father walk inside.

"Let them go. You already have the best seat in the house." She fussed around him, muttering under her breath, and scrunching his curls into a better shape.

"There." Hedone skipped backward when she saw her father's tired but patient smile. "Don't look at me like that."

"I have gone on a date before, pumpkin."

Hedone coughed to hide her embarrassment. "I know, it's just that mama looks ready to chew through steel."

Eros chuckled and patted his daughter on the head. "Don't worry. I can fix that."

"I hope so." Bowing at the waist, she moved aside and permitted him to enter the dining hall. "Your lady awaits." And she watched from the reception area, twisting the apron strings around her fingers.

With a rose in hand, Eros strolled across the dance floor toward Psyche, who waited in her chair, arms crossed. Several nymphs and dryads waved or called for his attention to no avail. He focused on the woman wrapped in a silky plum dress and wearing a firm frown. The second he arrived at the table, Eros held out the rose, which she naturally reached out to take. Before her fingers touched the stem, Eros switched the rose with his hand and grabbed hers. Then he drew Psyche out of her chair and into his arms for a deep kiss.

Hedone punched both fists high in the air. "And he sticks the landing!"

"Could you not?" grumbled Hades as he walked around her.

Hedone stuck her tongue out at the grump, whose idea of romance used a trap clause with pomegranate seeds. Her parents were back on track to a fantastic anniversary. And when they took off for their getaway, then Hedone could drive off in that beautiful beast of a machine.

Chapter Two

Never Ever Underestimate Aphrodite

Finally allowed a moment to breathe, Hedone gave herself a well-earned reward. She used a copper coin to summon a soda and moseyed into a quiet corner. As she sipped on her lemon-lime, Hedone watched the busy restaurant. Despite a little hiccup, her plan was unfolding beautifully. Everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. The staff kept up with the guests and the beach offered relaxing views of the ocean waves.

The Muses had taken over the stage with two sets of keyboards and the drums. They were always the best at entertainment. Whenever they sang and danced together, the Muses blended and swiveled in harmony. It was hard to miss all those hips and curves swaying together in sympatico-

"Whoa. Hold up, I'm not here for a date. I'm here to take care of mama and baba." Hedone nervously glanced in her parents' direction. "Stick to the plan, Hedone, don't get distracted. Remember, no more trouble tonight." But her eyes wandered to the stage.

There was one muse who stood out. She had a lithe willowy stature and short blonde curls that turned platinum in the light. The muse ignored the surrounding crowd to draw on her notepad at a furious pace. What was her name again? Eula or maybe Eunice. Hedone had only ever seen her from afar, one dancer lost among the other eight. It was easy to mix up The Muses. Hedone found it less stressful to think of them as a group organism rather than learn their names by heart. Although part of that was changed after the last Pantheon assembly when Calliope became the center of The Fates' prophecies.

"Speaking of." Hedone stepped out of the shadows and waved at the newest mythic to join the Elites. Calliope responded with a wave of her

own and walked out to meet Hedone. As she left the stage, one of her sisters followed and began pestering Calliope with questions.

The blonde muse with colorful streaks was quite insistent. Hedone couldn't help but hear their conversation as they drew closer. "Clio shouldn't be the lead singer tonight. She's overly invested right now."

"No, Erato. We took a vote earlier and you will abide by it."

Erato skipped faster to keep up with her taller sister and gestured toward the stage. "I'm serious. What if Clio gets too emotional and ruins the whole performance?"

"At least she'll have worked out her feelings."

"But we'll lose," whined Erato. "I should take the lead."

"Is winning all you can think about?" Calliope reached Hedone and flashed a weary smile. "Hi, sorry about that. Good to see you again."

"Same here, thank you for the save earlier. Mr. Birch gets antsy about his karaoke machine." Then Hedone stuck her hand out for Calliope's sister. "I'm Hedone, Goddess of Pleasure, Eros and Psyche's daughter. It's nice to meet you."

The blonde shot a glare at Calliope but returned Hedone's smile and shook hands. "Erato, Muse of the Erotic. I thought you looked familiar. You have your mother's eyes."

"Thank you. I'm sure The Muses will put on a fantastic performance. You always do." Hedone then leaned close and whispered, "Did you get the shakedown yet?"

Calliope pointed at Mnemosyne who chatted with Demeter and Persephone. "Our mother gave Hades our donation early, including the talent show entry fee. He was happy to take the money."

"I'm sure he was." Hedone tucked that bit of information in the back of her mind. "Whatever it takes to skip the line."

Calliope sighed. "Mostly it's because I'm not ready to speak with *him*."

Hedone stole a glance in Zeus and Hera's direction, then nodded. "Gotcha."

"Wise, for now. But it does delay the inevitable," said a voice that startled all three ladies.

Erato and Hedone bobbed quick curtsies for the Goddess of the Hunt and her high priestess. "Lady Artemis, Miss Iphigenia," they chimed.

Artemis had exchanged her usual knee-length tunic for a simple cowl neck hoodie and breeches. Meanwhile, Iphigenia's black turtleneck dress hugged her curves in all the right places. Hedone inwardly sighed and wished she had someone that stunning on her arm.

Calliope started a curtsey, paused for an awkward second, then finished with respectful nods to Artemis and Iphigenia. "It's good to see both of you again."

"Likewise." Artemis returned the nod, while Iphigenia curtsied. "When it comes to family traits, the last thing we need is our Calliope and Zeus trading barbs around mortals. And wouldn't that make Mnemosyne unamused? Eh, eh?" She tilted forward and widened her big brown eyes.

The uncomfortable silence was broken when Iphigenia gently squeezed Artemis' arm. "Your father's sense of humor shines bright, my love."

"Right." Artemis lost her smile, then held up a business card. "In any case, we should discuss important matters." She placed the card in Calliope's hand. "Your temper tantrums have consequences now."

There was a tiny muscle twitch next to Calliope's eye, but she managed to reply with a curt. "Yes, ma'am, I understand."

"I hope you do." With a sly smile, Artemis crooked her arm for Iphigenia, who wrapped a hand around it. "Enjoy your evening and good luck in the contest."

As the Goddess of the Hunt and her high priestess walked away, Hedone heard the couple mutter to each other.

"But the warriors always laugh at my jokes," grumbled Artemis as she led her girlfriend to their private table. "My jokes kill. You know that."

"To my core."

Erato blew a low whistle, then stuck a thumb in Artemis' direction. "What was that about?"

Hedone drew both hands behind her back. "It's the never-ending game of politics. Artemis made a friendly overture to gain favor with Calliope. I'm sure Athena, Demeter, and Hestia have been planning their moves too. Unfortunately, Artemis acts fast and now the race has begun."

"What race?"

Calliope flapped the card against one palm. "To be my mentor. As their student, they assume they'll have my vote to strengthen their positions when The Pantheon make decisions."

"Remember," Hedone gave Calliope a comforting squeeze on the arm. "Themis' offer still stands, and she is no longer tied to their games."

Calliope scowled as she tucked Artemis' business card in the back pocket of her white pants. "That's because she has her own agenda. Sorry, Hedone, I have my hands full keeping my sisters out of trouble."

"Hey, pretty babes!" Pan's voice boomed inside the dining hall as he moved in on two muses. "Red and Green. Green and Red. X-mas party's in my bed." Then Pan slapped a hand on the rear of the green-haired muse. There was a gasp from everyone, followed quickly by a battle cry from Green.

"Ugh, again!" Calliope wagged a finger at Erato. "Stay out of Clio's way, Erato. I mean it." Then she ran to diffuse the situation before her enraged sister ripped a horn off Pan's head. "Mel, don't hurt the idiot!"

"So, random subject." Erato slinked sideways toward Hedone. "I'm thinking of asking Aphrodite for a raise. Does your grandmother have any new favorite desserts? Like cupcakes or maybe pies?"

Hedone sneered. "Don't know, don't care. Except for big gatherings like this, I steer clear of Aphrodite as much as possible. And good luck getting a raise from her. For years, her chef has been threatening to quit over wages. My grandmother's idea of a raise is a pat on the head and a threat in the ear. She's horrible. I wish Miss Pandaisia would quit. I'd pay good money to see Aphrodite fry an egg by herself."

"Damn." Erato snapped her fingers. "There goes the exploding banana cream pie."

"Exploding?" Then Hedone gasped. "You're the prankster who's been making Aphrodite's life a living hell!" Out of pure admiration, she started a slow clap. "Brava, I didn't think anyone could wind-up my grandmother like that and not get their flesh burned off their bones."

Shushing her, Erato grasped Hedone's hands and looked around the room. "Not so loud."

"Right, of course." Hedone stepped a little closer, then lowered her voice. "Although, I am curious about how you'll continue with Bubbles around."

Erato quirked her head. "Who?"

Hedone was only too happy to dish out the details. "Last week, Ares gave my grandmother a manticore to guard her property, and she named

him Bubbles. He's fully grown, but he has the cutest pan-pipe roar."

"Roar?" Erato grew increasingly pale.

"He is already protective of the swans and they adore him right back. It's quite sweet to see. His stinger's aim is spot on too. Hephaestus is thinking of taking him birding." Noting the change in Erato's demeanor, Hedone curled a finger for the muse to come closer. "However, in the interest of keeping Aphrodite on her toes, I'll let you in on a secret. Bubbles loves chocolate. His favorite treats are chocolate-covered strawberries." Then she held a finger to her lips and walked backward from Erato. "You didn't hear it from me."

As Hedone strolled past the stage, she saw the muse with platinum curls sitting on a corner, both legs hanging off the edge. Her head was bent over the drawing tablet and her pencil tip sailed across the paper. She was fully engrossed with her art. Then she lifted her head and Hedone gazed deep into hypnotic hazel eyes.

A shiver hit her spine like electricity. "Whoa." Hedone took off at a run to Barb's office and looked into the wall mirror. As the buzz ignited her body, Hedone checked her back, expecting to see an arrow. She wouldn't put it past another love deity to play matchmaker on her. But there was nothing. Hedone exhaled and relaxed into a smile. "It's natural." She cocked an eyebrow at the mirror when her mind conjured a saucy fantasy with the willowy blonde riding shotgun in the racer. "That's all I needed to know."

Hedone walked out of the office intending to catch that muse, but Barb waved for her to seat a new group that just walked in. Hedone mournfully glanced toward the stage then obediently returned to the reception area. Dionysus and his oversized entourage waited for her on the terrace. "Of course, it would be them."

As the God of Wine walked inside the restaurant, Hades stepped in his path and held out a hand. Dionysus grinned, then pointed at the only woman in his entourage. "Amy, give the big man his money."

"Sure thing, boss." She reached into her purse and gave Hades several pouches. "Are we getting reimbursed later, Dee?"

"This is for charity, Amphyctiyonis," chided Dionysus. "How gauche of you to ask?" There was an awkward pause as Amy and the rest of Dionysus' crew shared worried glances. But they humored their boss and followed

Hedone into the dining hall. She found them a nice grouping of tables nearby Hephaestus and far away from her parents.

Hades stopped by Hephaestus' table and looked around the hall. "And where is your lovely wife and her even more lovely money purse?"

Hephaestus double-checked his gold wristwatch. "Fashionably late, what else? Best guess, she's-" He flourished a hand and mimicked his wife's tone. "Waiting for the peak moment for everyone who is anyone to see her arrival. That's usually sunset… in three… two-"

As predicted, there was a sound of harps and four-part harmony humming drifting on the wind. "And here we go." With a curse-laden grumble, Hephaestus got up and walked with Hades to the terrace as the pink marble columns burst out of the gravel parking lot.

Unlike the other gates meant to transport Mythics into the mortal realm, these columns rose six feet high, and a stairway extended onto the terrace. The gate opened with a massive flare of golden beams. An hourglass silhouette appeared as a gold mist swirled around her unmistakable feminine curves and highlighted the silky hair that hung past her waist. Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, stepped out of the gate, posed with a hand on her hip, strut down the stairs, then swept onto the terrace as if it was her runway.

Hedone facepalmed at her grandmother's incessant need to be in the spotlight and she wasn't the only one annoyed at the ridiculous entrance.

Ignoring all the flash and sass, Hades stuck his hand right under Aphrodite's perfect nose. "Donation, please."

The goddess narrowed her eyes at him, then she pushed his hand aside. "And is there a point to this?"

Hades remained in her path. "If you want to enter the party, then donate to the fundraiser."

With a breathy laugh, Aphrodite flipped her blonde hair back with one hand. "And what does that have to do with me?"

Then Hera walked out of the reception area. Their regal queen strode around Hades to lay a dainty hand on the Goddess of Love's shoulder. "Everyone must contribute, Aphrodite. As part of The Pantheon, we have a responsibility." The longer Hera hit Aphrodite with an unblinking stare, the more Aphrodite cringed.

The Goddess of Love stepped back, then snapped her fingers at her two men, Hephaestus and Ares. They looked into her open palm then back at her. She prompted them with two more snaps and gestured for them to pay Hades. "Well?"

Ares glared at Heph and wagged a thick thumb toward Hades. "You're her husband."

"You're her boyfriend," snapped Hephaestus. "Never paid for your dates before, not starting now."

"I challenge you, then." Ares raised a closed fist, as did Hephaestus.

As Heph and Ares played Rock, Scissors, Paper over who had the honor of paying her debt, Aphrodite's chic façade switched between ethereal beauty and irritated bitch

"Losing our touch, Miss Irresistible?" Athena slipped behind the Goddess of Love and lifted a hand to pet the owl perched on her shoulder. "I remember the days when those two fell over themselves to suck your pinkie toe."

Aphrodite dropped her graceful image to snarl. "Don't make me shove that owl up your ass, gavel-glove." Knowing when to take her winnings and run, Athena chuckled as she left Aphrodite to stew in the spotlight.

Ares paused his fist in mid-air and offered. "Fifty-fifty?"

"All right, dammit," Hephaestus grumbled as he dug into his pocket then dumped the gold coins into Hades' palm. "I'll have to take it out of the wardrobe budget, honey."

The goddess' jaw dropped, and she pressed a hand over her heart. "But I have a reputation to maintain, and we've tightened the budget twice already."

"Then I suggest you recycle the clothes or take on more work." Hephaestus shrugged and gestured for his wife to follow him to their table. "The money has to come from somewhere. It's not like it appears out of thin air."

Hermes zipped past them on the way to the wine bar. "Technically-"

"Shut it, Hermes. You know what I mean." Hephaestus ambled back to their table with Aphrodite in tow.

Hedone shook her head and wondered how she could be related to that hot mess of a goddess. She was about to return to the dining hall when a gnarled bone and black marble gate surged out of the rose garden. Steam

crawled across the soil and the gaping maws of the skulls lining the gate seemed to mock the vibrant red roses. Every Mythic felt the ominous presence of the Goddess of Chaos and the parking lot was evacuated before the gate fully opened.

"That is the absolute last Mythic we need tonight." Hedone wrapped both hands around her arms to hold back a shudder. She understood the pleasure of the forbidden and dangerous, but Hedone never figured out how her father and that sick sadistic bitch were ever a couple.

"Fucking hell, Hades." Poseidon slapped his brother upside the head. "Did you have to invite her?"

"Don't get your bikini in a bunch, Don. It's not like I meant to. I told the messengers to send all the invites and forgot about her. I'll take her party fee out of my pocket."

Eris walked out of her gate, swishing her black feather gown along the mist-covered gravel then directed her mismatched blue and yellow eyes upon the terrace. Mythics scattered or lowered their heads to avoid her unsettling gaze, especially when her pupils flashed with an asynchronous rhythm. With blood-red lips, she sneered at their reaction and made her way to the terrace. She barely glanced at Apollo and Hestia on the porch swing. As she passed Ares, Eris gave him a polite nod and a curtsey to Zeus. They responded with nods of their own, though neither moved to embrace her.

Hedone didn't blame them.

"Good evening, Mother." Eris flicked her fiery orange faux hawk out of her eyes before she walked to Hera. "I finished the task you sent me this morning. Got anything else for me?"

"Such the hard worker. Don't worry, I'll find you something tomorrow." Hera welcomed her daughter with a hug. If one called the brush of hands on shoulders a hug. It was stiff and lasted two seconds. A pat on the head showed more warmth. At least Hera's proud expression looked genuine.

Then Eris laid eyes on Hades and gave him a disturbing smile. "Good evening, My Lord Hades. I trust everything is well with the missus?"

Mr. Underworld Badass almost squeaked out his answer, but to his credit, he cleared his throat and acknowledged Eris with a deep firm voice. "We are doing well. And you?"

Eris swept her hand through the evening air. "I am in an excellent mood tonight. Although, I am sorry to say I'm light on cash. I've been working for

my mother pro bono."

Hades shook his head and tried to grin. It was a miserable failure. "That's fine. You enjoy your evening. Hopefully, everyone else will have a good evening without any complications." He emphasized the last three words.

Eris made a deep curtsey. "Of course. In fact, I would be happy to forgo my usual fee in lieu of a donation." Hades grunted his acceptance and waved her into the dining hall.

Aphrodite scowled when Eris breezed past without losing so much as a copper coin. "Hera had to get the workaholic kids." Then she turned a thoughtful gaze upon Eros and Psyche canoodling at their table.

For the first time, Hedone witnessed two impossibilities: Aphrodite was deep in thought and reached for a garlic-laden breadstick. Hedone could see the wheels turn inside her grandmother's head. As The Goddess of Love, Aphrodite never thought beyond the present. Or more precisely, Aphrodite never planned ahead. But when motivated, her impulsive brain moved faster than a bullet train.

"That's a bad sign." On the verge of panicking, Hedone looked around the restaurant until she found Prometheus sitting beside the bay windows. She sped between the tables and reached him within seconds. "I need your help. Aphrodite is going to ruin the night for my parents, then make them call off their vacation and work. Can you redirect her?"

Prometheus peered at her, then yawned and scratched at the stubble under his chin. "Don't you think you're overreacting? The Erotes already make a lot of money for her. She needs to put some extra effort and more belief will show up."

"That's not how she sees it," insisted Hedone. "Aphrodite wants more money without sacrificing her leisure time. She's already doing it, why do you think my father and his siblings showed up so late? My mother got here early because she refused to do more work, but my father stuck around helping everybody else. I know it in my gut that Aphrodite will do everything in her power to make things worse." She pleaded. "I can only do so much. I still have to wait on my tables tonight."

Prometheus sighed. "Very well. Let me talk with Heph." He got up and meandered over to The God of the Blacksmiths.

Hephaestus was already on his second pint and pulled his basket of breadsticks closer. "I'm not sharing."

After shaking his head, Prometheus whispered something, then pointed at Aphrodite, who meandered through the reception area. "Don't give me shit. You owe me."

Hephaestus let out a hearty laugh. "And I know who you owe, but fine. I'll help, but it's going to cost you." He presented an outstretched palm.

Prometheus reached into his pockets and placed five gold coins in Hephaestus' greedy hand.

The god shook his head. "I'm gonna need more. I gotta cover Aphrodite's donation for tonight."

Grumbling, Prometheus pulled out more gold coins. "There you go. Now do something about your wife. I happen to agree with Hedone. Aphrodite needs to give Eros and Psyche space tonight."

"Yeah, yeah. Go on and let me work."

Prometheus returned to Hedone and slapped a friendly hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Hephaestus will take care of your grandmother."

Hedone looked between Prometheus and Hephaestus. "Are we sure we're talking about the same guy?"

Prometheus settled into his seat. "Heph likes to show the world he's a big grump. But underneath it all, he's a real softy. He knows Aphrodite's weaknesses."

Hephaestus lumbered his way to Aphrodite, who was almost finished with her breadstick. He shuffled to his wife's side. "Honey, I am in dire need of your help. I need to do a new machine for a show and my teams insist that your beauty is the best marketing in the Mythic world."

Aphrodite wiped off the parmesan crumbs from her fingers and gave him a withering look. "Are you talking about selfies? Cause that's old news."

"No, no. Not those. This is something better." Hephaestus scratched his beard as he searched for an idea until he laid eyes on a model ship in a bottle. "A 3-D miniature!"

That caught her attention. Aphrodite's eyes grew big, and she clasped both hands together. "You mean those sculptures made right before your eyes."

"Yes, practically performance art by technology." Hephaestus took his wife by the arm and led her out of the reception area. "But I need to see you in more modern poses. Let's go to the patio. It's nice and quiet. I assure you, my dear, these machines will set the art scene on fire."

As Hedone watched through the bay windows, the couple reappeared on the patio and under the decorated pergola. Hephaestus lit the tiki torches and gave Prometheus a thumbs-up behind his back. The Titan replied by raising his mug of beer.

For a half-hour, Hedone peered through the window as she attended to other tables in her section. Hephaestus had Aphrodite posing as he made a huge fuss around her. From bending awkwardly across tables to draping dramatically on a wooden bench, he maneuvered Aphrodite into several poses, even balancing on her toes while reaching for a pinecone garland that hung from the wooden beams. Hedone got a good giggle out of that.

This kept up for a while until Pan poked his head around the corner. "Are we doing pedestal poses? I want in." The satyr skipped onto the patio. "Look! I can do a headstand on a chair. Will that work for your 3D modeling too?" Then he hopped onto the tables and mimicked Aphrodite, reaching for a cloud while sticking his tail parallel to the ground.

"All right, that's it. I'm done." Aphrodite scowled, put down her arms and stepped off her table. She walked away from her husband. "I hope you have what you need, Heph." Aphrodite raised a warning finger at the satyr as she passed him. "Don't you dare touch me."

Hephaestus growled at Pan. "Now look what you did. Could have stretched it for ten more minutes, ye' idiot." Then he chased after his wife. "Wait, honey."

Ignoring her husband, Aphrodite strode through the restaurant, then she stopped at the dance floor. She saw Eros and Psyche sharing a quick kiss. Aphrodite put one hand on her hip and scanned the room.

Hedone yelped and jumped behind a potted palm when Aphrodite noticed her. Aphrodite narrowed her eyes, then said to her husband. "Nice try. I recommend you stay out of my way tonight."

Hephaestus ambled past Prometheus. "I gave it a go. That's all ye' get."

"You could have pulled off another ten minutes," Prometheus called after him, then he gestured for Hedone to come over. "Keep an eye on your

grandmother, but don't openly confront her. That will end badly. It's best to circumvent her efforts from a distance. Trust me."

"Got it." Hedone took a long, winding way around the tables, being careful to blend in with the staff and diners.

When Aphrodite turned to leave the dining hall, Hedone quickened her pace. Deceptively calm, Aphrodite meandered onto the deck. She casually looked around the area until finding the Goddess of Chaos.

From a safe distance, Hedone watched Aphrodite approach Eris, who lounged on a bench by herself. Whatever Aphrodite said, it was enough for Eris to sit up and follow the Goddess of Love. They stopped near the windows in the reception area. Hedone shadowed them from inside the restaurant. Then she pressed herself to the wall and listened to their voices through the glass.

"You're lying," snapped Eris. "Dionysus has it."

"Is that what he told you?" Aphrodite chuckled. "I'm sure you're familiar with Three Card Monte. Where is the queen of hearts? Round and round she goes. Where she stops, nobody knows. You know what to do. GO!"

Eris stormed away from Aphrodite and yelled. "I have better things to do than deal with this shit."

Hedone dove behind Barb's concierge stand as Eris marched through the reception area. Aphrodite wasn't far behind, albeit at a leisurely pace. Hedone peered around the pedestal, stood up when it was safe, then followed her grandmother into the dining hall.

Several dryads stood beside the dance floor and were discussing their talent show act. Pan called out to them from his seat. "You can always join my act, sweets. Just climb under my magic table. There's a surprise waiting for you."

The dryads scurried out of Eris' warpath, but one stayed long enough to slap the satyr. "Nasty bastard."

"Out of my way," ordered the Goddess of Chaos and she swept her arm wide.

As Eris trudged past the satyr, Pan threw his best smile at her. "What's the hurry, Miss Badass? I saved a seat for you."

The Goddess of Chaos slammed a palm on his table, burned a handprint on the tablecloth, and leaned forward until the satyr pressed his back into

the chair's backrest. "I'd rather skin you alive and use your flea-infested hide for a doormat."

Pan watched Eris leave, then threw out a weak, "A simple ‘No, thank you' would have worked." He recovered when a sea nymph walked by his table. "Hey, baby, whatcha' doing for the next six minutes and thirteen seconds?"

As Hedone made her way through the diners, she soon ended up near the stage and slipped to Calliope's side. "Could I hang out here for a bit?"

The muse shrugged. "Sure, what's going on?" When Hedone gestured toward Eris, Calliope's smile dropped. "Fuck."

The same word probably went through Eros' head because one glance at Eris, his ex-girlfriend, and he sprang out of his chair like a jack in a box. "I should go check on the fam. I'll be back soon." Then he took off.

Confused by his behavior, Psyche frowned until she saw the ex-girlfriend closing in. "Okay, that explains it." Then she glared in Aphrodite's direction, but the Goddess of Love wasn't paying any attention. She was currently talking with a sea nymph with pearl earrings.

When Eris saw Eros escape to hide among his siblings, the goddess slowed her march to an easy saunter. She scoffed at his retreat, but Eris continued to where Psyche waited.

Eris dragged a chair from another table and spun it around. "Mind if I sit here? Thanks." She planted it beside her rival and straddled the chair like a cowboy.

Both goddesses had a perfect view of the Erotes and vice versa. Hedone wondered why Eris ogled Eros without an ounce of shame right in front of Psyche.

Psyche snapped her fingers in front of Eris' mismatched eyes. "Careful with the drool or Hera will have to yank on your leash again."

"I like to appreciate the view." Eris diverted her leering to face Psyche. "And Hera doesn't give a shit what I do. I make her too much money. Besides, a leash suggests we have a connection, implying sentiment in our relationship. Hera and I have an understanding."

"One would hardly call it an understanding." Psyche picked up her fork and held it between her index fingers and thumbs. "Maybe ‘leash' isn't quite right since your mother has deluded herself into thinking that she has tamed you."

As the fork began to glow, Eris' eyes glanced at Psyche's hands, but she retained her sneer. "But that's the point of chaos, isn't it? I'm not supposed to be tame."

"I suppose that's as good of an excuse as any." Psyche nodded and lifted the glowing fork to eye height. "I'm sure it's easier to rely on chaos when you're feared, instead of respected. Doesn't it bother you that The Pantheon uses you like a tool?" Then she twisted and stretched the fork between her hands much like a chef twisting salt-water taffy.

Eris quirked her head as Psyche rolled the former utensil into a ball, then squeezed her hand around it. "Mortal, mythic, anyone and anything is a tool, even pain. But you would understand that most of all, wouldn't you, as a former mortal? In many ways pain is very good. It's been good to you and fantastic for me."

"True." Psyche opened her palm to reveal a tiny pyramid. "Pain is necessary for growth. There is no avoiding it." She closed, then reopened her hand. The pyramid was now a steel arrow.

Hedone bit down on her lower lip as the tension ramped up. Her mother wouldn't fall for Eris' bait, would she? With every Mythic in the place watching, Eris and Psyche risked getting thrown out if they fight inside the restaurant.

"I can't agree more." Eris' eyes flashed, likely from excitement or irritation. Didn't matter which, both made Hedone nervous.

"In my job," said Eris. "Pain is the most useful tool in those last precious moments of a mortal's life. Happiness and true love get them to the high moments. Then I watch them descend to their lowest point on their deathbed, begging for release, then wilting like a flower as the soul flies away. Those have given me the biggest payouts."

Disgust reflected on Psyche's face, and she took a moment before replying. "Glorifying the deaths of mortals and quantifying it, only proves that you are a sadistic monster under a veneer of servitude. Love is more than euphoria and thrills. It's what keeps everyone sane, including Mythics. However, I can't say the same for you." She pressed her palms together and smoothed out the metal into a dagger.

"Nice edge," Eris finally muttered.

"Thanks." Psyche nonchalantly flipped the dagger over her knuckles. "When was the last time you had a break, took a real vacation? Those

golden apples don't need tending all the time."

"It has been a while." Eris squinted one yellow eye at Psyche as the dagger twirled along the other goddess' fingertips. "I can always go hang out with Hypnos on his island. But the world wouldn't be nearly as fun without me."

"Wanna bet?" Psyche grasped the dagger's hilt.

Eris blinked, then blurted. "You've got lipstick on your teeth."

"I'm not wearing any lipstick."

As the two goddesses stared at each other, Hedone gripped the tray hard enough for her fingers to go numb. "Don't do it, mama. Don't give Aphrodite an excuse to kick you out."

"Well, this has been as productive as whale shit." Eris stretched her arms high and let out a yawn. "And to think we almost ended up in a catfight."

"Oh, seven heavens," laughed Psyche as she returned the metal back to a fork. "We're nowhere near a fight."

Eris raised her eyebrows. "No?"

"Not by a long shot. Mind you, if we ever do fight," Psyche curled a finger to beckon her rival closer, "I won't posture or waste words, but I will draw first blood."

A vicious grin spread on Eris' face and she broke into savage laughter. "One sip of ambrosia and you finally grew a spine. Say ‘Hi' to the cowardly bunny for me." Then Eris got up, tossed the chair aside, and strolled across the dance floor. She smirked when Eros swiveled from making eye contact with her.

Hedone nearly sunk into the floor with relief. "Thank The Fates!"

"Funny, though." Calliope watched The Goddess of Chaos flip off Aphrodite then top it with an air-kiss. "I don't think Eris was trying very hard."

Hedone wiped the sweat off her brow. "At this point, I don't care."

"Still. I'd monitor things if I were you." Calliope patted Hedone's shoulder. "Call me if you need help."

Hedone waved away the muse's concern. "That's sweet of you, but everything should be fine now. You go and win that talent show!" She was in such a good mood, Hedone practically skipped to the kitchen.

When Hedone came back with a tray full of food, she was shocked to find her parents' table surrounded by sea nymphs, dryads, and satyrs. "After all the stupid shit I went through." She hurried through her tasks and delivered the food in record time. Then she marched to her parents' aid.

Eros rubbed both temples as he and his wife were pelted with questions and requests. He looked ready to explode like a volcano while her mother tapped her plate with a fork. It was obvious all the romantic vibes imbued at the table had been used up in a hurry. Two years of hard work, gone.

"When is my true love going to show up? I sent a letter last week," whined the nymph with orange blossoms in her hair. "In fact, I've been sending letters every week."

A satyr stomped his hooves and elbowed the sea nymph aside. "Screw true love. I got a list of girls here. Can you hook me up? Doesn't have to be all of ‘em."

Hedone repeatedly banged a hand on her tray, "Go on, shoo!" The noise scattered the more skittish satyrs, but merely annoyed the nymphs. She slipped between the nymphs and her parents. "If you continue to disturb other customers, I will complain to the board of directors, and you know exactly who I mean."

The sea nymph with pearl earrings, stuck her nose in the air and sniffed, "Fine. Come along, everyone."

Hedone smiled to her parents and bowed, "Carry on." Then everyone heard a tremendous crash of glass and porcelain plates. She turned.

A cypress dryad from a table called out in a sing-song voice. "Uh-oh, looks like someone twisted an ankle."

Hedone ran across the dining hall to the hurt mortal. "Harmony!" She knelt beside the waitress who had been lifted into a chair and now gripped her leg. "Let me see." Hedone cuffed the pants leg far enough to expose the ankle, then pressed her glowing hand to the skin. No point in being a tightwad. Nothing but the best healing for her friend.

Harmony's pained expression melted into relief then her cheeks turned rosy. "That feels amazing. How did you do that?" Of course, Hedone's healing came with an extra side of euphoria. She had yet to receive any complaints.

Mnemosyne appeared behind Hedone and tapped her on the shoulder. "I can take it from here, dear." The Goddess of Memory opened one hand,

revealing a shining butterfly. It flew to Harmony then burst into sparkles.

The mortal's eyes glazed over, and she looked around. "What am I doing here?"

"You're on a break, Harmony." Hedone helped the waitress out of the chair. "Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air?"

"Yes, fresh air sounds nice." The dazed waitress roamed through the reception and onto the terrace. Then she leaped onto a bench and pointed at the night sky. "Oooh, the moon!"

Mnemosyne cringed in embarrassment. "I might have hit her with a little too much."

Hedone let out a frustrated sigh. "Guess I'm taking over Harmony's section for now." She snapped her fingers at the mess of broken dishes and spilled food. Everything picked itself up and swirled into their previous states. She raced through both sections. This time she gave up the pretense of being mortal and used her belief to place the food, levitate the dirty dishes onto her tray, and instantly refill the drinks. It was grueling but Hedone wanted to show Aphrodite what a proper work ethic looked like.

As Hedone made her third pass around the floor, Psyche waved a hand to flag down her daughter. "Sweetheart, you shouldn't run yourself ragged like this."

"It's fine," quipped Hedone as she rushed past her mother, then she reversed course and blinked at the empty chair. "Where's baba?"

With a scowl and an irritated edge to her voice, Psyche gestured toward the reception area. "Ares insisted they needed to chat."

"Here we go again." Hedone put her tray down on a fold-out stand. "I'll go look for him."

Psyche called after her, "Your father is fully capable of finding his way back."

"Don't worry," said Hedone as she hurried toward the front. "It won't hurt to check."

And it was lucky she did. Her father was trapped in the reception area, surrounded by those damned nymphs, dryads, and satyrs. Ares wandered around the crowd, orbiting his son in frustration.

"Just put your foot down and tell them ‘No'," yelled the God of War, then he threw his hand in the air. "Fuck this, I'll talk to you about Venice tomorrow."

"Tomorrow then," came her father's voice from the center. "What was your name again? Perhaps I can look for the letter when I get home."

"My name is Acaste." The sea nymph with pearl earrings stomped her foot, then said, "But that river hussy, Nomia, wants the same guy and you can't let her."

Hedone squeezed her way into the crowd and grasped her father's arm to pull him free. But a satyr wrapped an arm around her waist, then tossed her outside the group. Hedone huffed at the audacity someone dared to get in her way. She spun around to see several nymphs dragging her father out the opposite side of the crowd and into the office.

"Ladies, I'm flattered," she heard her father say, "but really…" And the door slammed shut.

"Oh no, you don't." Narrowing her eyes, Hedone rolled up her sleeves and withdrew a considerable amount of belief from the aether until her body glowed. "Unlike my father, I don't pussyfoot around."

The nymphs outside the office glanced at one another then scattered like mice. One satyr held the office door closed, while another two stomped their hooves at Hedone. They looked genuinely confused when the goddess advanced without hesitation. She zipped between them, then thrust out her wings and retracted them. Both satyrs were knocked apart, then she grabbed one by the horn and swung him into the second.

The second satyr ducked then snorted his defiance and tried to ram her. But she caught him in place with both of her hands on his horns, then twisted his head until he flipped to the floor. By the time his vision refocused, her foot was well on its way to slamming into his soft belly. As the wheezing satyr clutched his middle and regurgitated his meal, the other rose behind Hedone and wrapped his arms around her.

With a scowl, she shifted sideways, swung her arm under then over his shoulder and secured her arm around his, trapping the satyr. Then she twisted out of his grip and easily walked forwards. The satyr found his arms caught in a vice and was forced backward, hooves slipping and looking for a foothold where there were none.

To Hedone's surprise, Psyche strolled out of the dining hall and into the reception where she noticed the ruckus. "What's going on?"

"I've got this, mama," Hedone casually bounced the satyrs' heads together like cymbals. "You can go back to the table."

"Sure you don't need an extra hand?" asked her mother. The last satyr yelped when Psyche glared in his direction. He released the doorknob and scampered away. The door opened to reveal Eros falling backward with nymphs clinging on to him and his face was covered in lipstick kisses.

Both Psyche and Hedone gaped at the sight of Eros covered by flushed women in various stages of undress. Snickers and hushed whispers floated through the air. Psyche's face grew bright red with rage, and she let out a roar that grew in intensity until the whole building shook like jelly in an earthquake. Then she stormed out of the restaurant.

"Wait, Psyche." Eros shoved the nymphs away with enough strength to knock them against the wall, then raced after his wife. She raised a gate for home and ran through. Luckily for Eros, he managed to jump inside before it closed.

Hedone helplessly watched from the reception and felt all eyes on her, including the hypnotized staff. "What? How?" She turned and dropped onto the nearest bench, utterly exhausted.

The sea nymph now with one pearl earring limped to a dark corner of the reception area where Aphrodite watched the whole thing. "Liar, you said Hedone was a cream-puff. Where's our payment?"

"Right here." The Goddess of Love flourished a hand and created a small red bottle with an embossed heart in the glass.

The sea nymph gawked for a second before she whined. "But you said all of us were getting love potions."

"And that's true." Aphrodite dangled the red bottle between her fingers. "One bottle has a hundred doses. That's several doses for each, but only if you're careful. Catch!"

The sea nymph gasped and jumped for the bottle, as did other nymphs and satyrs, creating a screaming pile-up to control the love potion. The smarter ones watched the spectacle from a safe distance, then walked away and berated themselves for trusting Aphrodite.

It didn't take long for Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon to appear on the scene. Hades summoned ash and smoke which circled the brawlers. He clenched a fist which solidified the smoke into a chain and squeezed the group together. Poseidon levitated all the water from the pitchers in the reception area, then dumped the contents to cool off the brawlers.

By the time Zeus stepped up, the group was already declaring their apologies. Too little, too late. Zeus used his extreme strength to drag them out of the restaurant by the chain. With a twitch of his pinkie finger, he opened a gate to a deserted volcanic island, then tossed the lot through the opening.

"I'll pick you up next week!" he yelled, before sealing the gate.

Chapter Three

This Is Far From Over.

"She won. I can't believe Aphrodite won." Hedone sat at her parents' empty table. Tonight had so much promise, then Aphrodite showed up and it spiraled into a disaster. And oh, the embarrassment! Hedone groaned as she laid her forehead on the table and placed both hands over her head. How could she even think about approaching her willowy muse in this emotional state? Who would want to date this loser?

Artemis and Iphigenia occasionally checked on Hedone. She just gave them a sad little shrug and muttered. "Don't mind me. Enjoy your dinner." Whenever a diner tried to get Hedone's attention, Artemis summoned their food and drink, or she glared until they called for another waitress.

Hedone thought about going to her parents' home and check on them. But she knew they would tell her to stay out of it, then disappear to who knows where. Hedone obsessed over where she went wrong. Unless she was in two places at once, there was no preventing the catastrophe. And despite being born a love goddess, she had been rendered powerless by her own grandmother.

"No." Hedone slammed a fist on the table. "I refuse to be outdone by that glorified twat." But first she needed a proper plan before challenging Aphrodite again.

Hedone picked up a water goblet and moved it to the left side of the table. "Aphrodite." Next, she slid the second goblet to the right. "Me."

Then she held up the fork that could only have been her mother's because it was in the shape of a spear long enough to fit across her palm. "Mama." She placed the spear beside the water goblet that represented her, then put the second fork next to the Aphrodite goblet. "Baba."

She stared at the pieces before her. "Now where did I go wrong? What could I have done differently?" Hedone replayed the evening in her mind. "Maybe I should've recruited help with better experience?"

Hedone pushed the rest of the cutlery into the middle of the table along with the salt and pepper shakers. "The Erotes."

She looked across the dance floor to where her father's siblings enjoyed themselves. They didn't seem worried about Eros and Psyche, merely carried on with their evening. Hymie sat with Dionysus' entourage and flirted with several of the men. Ditus enjoyed a rousing discussion with his father, Hermes, at twice the normal speed. Their heads and hand gestures moved in almost a blur. Hedylogos cuddled as many nymphs as he could. Anteros did his usual smoldering gaze that attracted the more emo dryads while Himeros danced with four sirens at the same time.

At their wedding, her father's siblings were happy to accept Psyche into the family, far earlier than Aphrodite did. Hedone moved the cutlery and shakers to the right.

"But their loyalty remains with their brother," murmured Hedone. "Whatever decision he makes, they will support." She pushed the group to the left. "But The Erotes need Eros at the top of his game without marital troubles, otherwise they might lose their jobs." With a sigh, she slid the group to the right.

"Then again, if baba steps away from the title of Cupid, if he goes on hiatus or quits, another Erote will become Cupid. Himeros and Hedy would rip each other's wings off for the job." She moved two knives to the left.

"Maybe I'll approach a select few." Hedone plucked the salt and pepper shakers from the table, then held them in each hand. "Hymie and Anteros. Marriage and Love's Revenge." She glanced upward and peered at her two uncles. "Do they have enough incentive to help me?" Then Hedone jerked backwards in her seat when Aphrodite walked into her view.

The Goddess of Love made eye contact with Hedone. Then she walked up to Hymie, who is stood up to greet his mother. Instead of the expected air kisses from his mother, his jaw was gripped by her hand, his cheeks compressed and pinched until his lips puckered like a fish. As everyone watched, Aphrodite whispered in Hymie's ear. He nodded several times, glanced in Hedone's direction, then yielded to his mother with a final nod.

The Erotes had grown silent as they watched the tense encounter. A loving smile appeared on Aphrodite's face as she opened her hand, then she gave her son a gentle pat on the face. They waited until their mother was seated at Ares' table, before converging into a huddle. Hedone didn't need to eavesdrop. Aphrodite's haughty smirk said it all. The Erotes were off-limits.

"Great, right back where I started!" Hedone pounded a fist on her forehead. "How is that bitch blindsiding me?" She stopped when the lights dimmed, and a spotlight flashed onto the stage.

Hades strolled into the spotlight and announced, "Now for the talent show portion of our evening." He shook a finger at a table of excited sirens. "Sit down. You're banned for last year's shenanigans. Mnemosyne still has to visit the neighbors. Ahem, tonight's prize is the usual trophy and a bag of one hundred gold. Good luck to you all."

The show started with Dionysus' entire crew singing Sinatra's ‘I Get A Kick Out of You' and dedicating it to their boss, followed by a ghastly magic show by Pan. What was left of the river nymphs lip-synced to Grease's ‘Look At Me, I'm Sandra Dee.' Hedone almost blew her top when she realized the nymphs messed with Mr. Birch's karaoke machine to use the Grease soundtrack.

Then Hades introduced the previous winners, The Muses, who gave their rendition of Gloria Gaynor's ‘I Will Survive'. As planned, Clio was the lead vocalist. She took center stage, her glasses and gray hair sparkled in the spotlight while Erato remained on the keyboards. Calliope stood behind Clio, playing the bass guitar while the muse with platinum curls played the violin beside two of her sisters.

At the song's bridge, Clio walked off the stage and crossed the dance floor with the spotlight trailing after her. Himeros' face burned red when onlookers whispered and pointed as Clio walked to The Erote's table.

Hedone had forgotten The Erote of Lust and the Muse of History were once an item. How Clio ever thought they could survive past a month was laughable. But everyone had to hold out hope for love, otherwise, Aphrodite and The Erotes would be out of business. Himeros and Clio's romance ran hot, and their breakup exploded into an embarrassing meltdown at a party. Rumor was, Himeros made a pass at one of her sisters. Hedone wondered if he should change his title to Erote of Self-Destruction.

When Clio returned to the stage, Himeros leaned over to Hedylogos and whispered something. Hedy nodded, stood up, and made his way to where Hades watched the show. They had a short conversation and Hedy handed over a small bag of coins. He then made his way back to his siblings. The song ended with the expected applause and cheers from the audience. The Muses were a shoo-in.

Hades walked back on stage. "We have a last-minute entry. Put your hands together for The Erotes." There was an uproar of happy surprise from the crowd, especially from Aphrodite.

Himeros pinwheeled his arms and yelled for his stunned siblings to join him on stage. The nymphs at their table went wild, squealing and pushing the other Erotes to sing.

Hedone rolled her eyes when Tony Bennett's ‘The Lady is a Tramp' came through the speakers. The Erotes didn't know all the words and kept their eyes on the screen, but they sang their hearts out. It didn't matter to the audience that they were tipsy, Himeros and his siblings turned bad karaoke into entertaining slapstick. The audience laughed and clapped to the beat. But soon the playful laughter turned into passionate cheers.

"What the hell is going on?" Hedone peered around the room as the crowd's demeanor changed. The answer finally dawned on her when she saw the gold smoke winding around the floor, like a soft hazy ribbon that glinted in the candlelight. When the gold smoke dared to reach for her, Hedone puckered her lips and blew it backward.

And she wasn't the only one who noticed. Most of the major gods did. "Damn it, Aphrodite." Artemis glanced at the floor, twirled a hand which brushed the smoke away from Iphigenia. "The Muses are gonna be upset." Aphrodite's smoke almost did reach a muse with red hair. But one stomp of Calliope's foot sent the smoke rolling into the next table.

Hedone checked on the Muses, who had their arms crossed and frowned at The Erotes. With one impromptu song and Aphrodite's interference, all that hard work and practice went down the drain.

The Muses whispered between each other, pointing, scowling, and occasionally throwing their hands up in the air. Some looked resigned to their loss. Others, Erato, were upset. The green-haired muse stormed onto the dance floor and raised both middle fingers at The Erotes. But The Muses were quick to drag their sister back into the corner.

However, Calliope and Clio didn't appear angry. They had thoughtful expressions and whispered between themselves, before drawing their seven sisters into a huddle. One by one, the muses retreated and slipped out of the restaurant. By the time Hades announced The Erotes as the winners, only the redhead remained.

As the restaurant's lights came back on, Aphrodite walked up to her children with open arms and met them on the dance floor. "That was a marvelous surprise. I am so proud of you, my babies." She pinched Ditus' and Hedy's cheeks, then raised the trophy for all to see. "This deserves a place of honor in my gallery."

Then Ares snuck up behind Aphrodite and growled in her ear. Her eyes lit up when he pinched her bottom. Gracefully, she returned the trophy to Himeros. "But you hold on to it for now and I will see all of you in the morning. Good night." Arm in arm, Aphrodite and Ares strode past Hephaestus and left the restaurant.

The triumphant Erotes returned to their table where the nymphs couldn't wait to drown them in hugs and kisses. Meanwhile, the redhead left her dark corner behind the stage and made her way around the dining tables.

Iphigenia leaned into Artemis and pointed out the wandering muse. "Looks like The Muses are misbehaving again."

Artemis chuckled as she poured more wine for herself and Iphigenia. "And here I thought tonight's entertainment had ended."

The muse casually stopped beside her mother and whispered in her ear. Mnemosyne perked up in her seat, mouthed a few choice words, then got up.

Hedone drummed her fingers on the table. Iphigenia was right. The Muses were up to something. It was big enough for Mnemosyne to intercept Barb with a butterfly.

In a daze, the hostess headed for her office, claiming she needed to make a few phone calls. The redhead followed Barb into the office. A few minutes later, the muse returned to the dining hall wearing a waitress' black vest over her white and silver pantsuit. Her red hair was twisted into a messy top knot and she held a tray under one arm. The muse wandered closer towards the Erote's table and there she stood watching as the Erotes tucked the bag of money into the trophy's bowl.

"Artemis." Iphigenia's voice had an otherworldly echo as she grasped the goddess by the hand. "I'm getting a premonition from The Fates. They say Hedone needs to see this." Then the high priestess grabbed the largest porcelain platter on their table, scraped the food onto an empty plate and wiped the platter clean.

Artemis snapped her fingers and gestured for Hedone to sit at their table. "Quickly."

Confused, Hedone jumped at the goddess' command and grabbed the seat opposite of Iphigenia.

Whispering her spell, Iphigenia poured a glass of merlot into the shallow well. She waved both hands over the platter until the wine shimmered into a scrying bowl. "Now, we wait."

Their patience was soon rewarded. Desperate for some peace and quiet, Hymie and Ditus escaped to the wine bar and joined Hephaestus. Then the redhead made her move. She hefted her tray like a waitress, reached between the diners, and picked up the empty glasses from the table. Mistaking her for Harmony, the Erotes and their guests paid little attention. The moment she saw a wide enough gap between a river nymph and an oak dryad, the muse seized the trophy.

She sprinted past tables, avoided chairs, and dodged wandering diners. Once through the reception area, the muse ran onto the terrace and using one hand on the handrail, vaulted off the terrace without any trouble. Hedone stopped gawping when she lost sight of the redhead and switched to the scrying platter that shimmered with a view over the terrace.

Funny, the muse stood in the parking lot, waiting. Just waiting.

Himeros, Hedylogos, and Anteros jumped out of their chairs and pursued the muse. But Pothos called from behind. "Aw come on, guys. Is it really worth it?" He followed but moved at half the pace.

When the three Erotes appeared on the terrace, the muse took off running and rounded the corner. Himeros, Hedy, and Anteros gave chase, then slowed down when they saw the other muses waiting for them on the patio,

"I smell a trap," whispered Anteros as they walked closer to the waiting muses. His voice sounded distorted through the scrying platter.

"What are they gonna do?" Himeros sneered at his pessimistic brother. "Shake their tits at us?"

Once under the pergola, the redhead removed the black vest and stepped behind Calliope to hand her the trophy. Hedone spotted a petite muse in a corner, almost concealed in the shadows. Her silver star earring glinted from the light of the tiki torches. She appeared alert and nowhere near nervous.

As the Erotes drew near, Calliope closed her eyes and clenched both fists. Sparks danced across her knuckles then everyone heard a rumble of thunder. The Erotes paused and looked at the cloudy night sky. When Calliope opened her eyes, the electricity around her hands faded and a drizzle began to fall.

"Is that it? Rain. We're in fuckin' Oregon, losers." Hedylogos scoffed at the lame attempt to intimidate. "You had your fun. Give the trophy back already."

Calliope crossed her arms. "It is a lovely trophy. But doesn't it bother any of you whether it was earned? Did you put in the work? Of course not, mama did everything for you."

Pothos eventually plodded around the corner. When he pulled up behind his brothers, The Erote of Longing raised his unsteady finger to count out loud. Hedone wondered just how many beers her uncle had.

The muses glanced at each other when Pothos started counting them. They moved behind Calliope but always with the eldest sister in the center. Every time a muse moved, Pothos squinted, took a breath to steady himself, then started over.

Hedylogos lowered his head, then raised it again. He had his ‘Charm The Pants Off The Girl' smile plastered over his face. "There's no point in bitching over what happened. For once, you didn't win. There will be other contests. Give me the money and we can talk about it over a glass of wine."

Calliope's face remained stoic as she stepped forward. "You can keep your wine. The trophy and money stays with us."

When the muse with star earrings lifted her hand, Artemis whispered, "Who is she signaling? Widen the scope." Iphigenia swept her hands over the scrying platter and drew the view higher. Out of the Erotes' view, three muses, including the willowy blonde, crouched on the roof of the restaurant.

Himeros pushed past his brother. "This is ridiculous." He reached for the trophy. Calliope jerked it away. Then Clio dipped low and swept a leg at

his feet, forcing Himeros to trip and fall backward. His head hit the patio with a thud.

Pothos hopped backward and shouted. "Only six!"

The star muse swung her arm down and her three sisters dropped from the roof. The blonde landed on Pothos, swung around his neck, and knocked him to the ground while Anteros was tackled by the two brunettes. Calliope hit Anteros' neck, striking his Adam's Apple, then planted a forward kick into his stomach.

Hedylogos threw open his wings. A bucket of canola oil was thrown from behind by the redhead, coating his wings, and rendering them useless. Next, the willowy blonde came up and tossed a bucket of mud on top of the oil. When Hedy tried to grab either muse, the redhead and the blonde took off in separate directions. Behind him, the star muse grabbed him by the belt, tugged him sideways, and he slid down the grassy embankment.

Rubbing the back of his head with both hands, Himeros picked himself off the patio, only to be knocked forward when a muse jumped on his back.

There was a loud thump from the bay windows, drawing Hedone's attention from the scrying platter. Himeros spun and waved his arms like a madman because an infuriated Erato sat on his shoulders. Her elbows were hooked under his chin and she was doing her damndest to pull Himeros' head off his neck.

Prometheus got up and casually drew the curtain across the bay windows. He winced from two more thumps on the glass before he returned to his seat and calmly drank more beer.

When Hedone looked back into the scrying platter, two muses weighed down Anteros while a third attacked. After he managed to kick one away, another hellion took her place. Calliope gave him a bloody nose and sucker-punched him once or twice before she had to switch focus and hit Himeros or kick Hedylogos down the embankment. One muse with a long braid took Calliope's place and landed punches on Anteros that had the same painful effect.

"I had no idea The Muses were that touchy over a contest." Hedone tapped her chin with one finger. "Interesting." At the same time, she wondered why her uncles held back. While not the most hardened warriors, The Erotes could hold their own in a fight, especially against The Muses. Her three uncles spent most of their time withstanding the attacks and

healing themselves. When Himeros healed himself completely and fumbled his way upright, Calliope kicked him between the legs, dropping him again. A small voice in Hedone's mind wondered if her uncles didn't want to win this fight, that they might actually feel guilty. Then she realized someone was missing. "Where's Pothos?"

Artemis pointed at a shadowy lump on the lawn, that occasionally raised its head then dropped back to the grass.

Eventually, Hymie and Ditus noticed their siblings' half-empty table and left the wine bar. Hymie came up to the nymphs. "Where did everyone go?" The wide-eyed nymphs at the table had become quiet since catching a glimpse through the windows. They answered by pointing to the hidden bay window.

Ditus made their way to the window that mysteriously thundered, then peered behind the curtain. "Oh shit." Both rushed through the dining hall and out the front door.

Once Hymie and Ditus were gone, Artemis called out to the nymphs at The Erotes' table. "Ladies, some friendly advice. You should head home now." They didn't need to be told twice.

When Hymie and Ditus arrived, Hedylogos had slipped down the embankment for the third time. Pothos remained strewn on the wet grass. Himeros was curled on the patio floor while Anteros flipped another muse off his back, only to be side-swiped by Calliope's right hook. Then Calliope saw the two new Erotes. She ran at them, fists ready to attack.

Both raise their hands in surrender. "Truce, truce." Hymie used a napkin that was tucked into his jacket pocket. "See, I'm waving the white flag."

A shocked Calliope skidded in the mud, pulled her fist back, and narrowly avoided colliding into them. She inhaled deep gulps of air and stared. "Wh-what?" The other muses quickly spread apart and released Anteros, letting him drop to his knees.

"We don't want any trouble," explained Ditus as they rushed to Anteros' side and hauled their brother upwards. "I'm sure everyone here wants to leave with their self-respect intact." They checked Anteros' bruised eye and gave it a tap. "Better get started on fixing that."

Anteros pressed a hand to his eye, and a glow appeared under his palm. He winced as his body rushed through the healing process. On the patio, Himeros groaned as his entire body glowed with healing belief. Hedylogos

eventually climbed his way up the embankment and emerged like a giant turkey with his muddy wings covered in twigs and sand.

Hymie tucked the napkin inside his jacket. "Why don't you keep the money, and everyone here keeps this embarrassing situation under wraps?" Then he growled at Anteros, "Right?" The Erote of Love's Revenge gave a reluctant nod.

"The trophy stays with us," insisted Calliope.

"We need that, please. You have so many, and this is our first." Ditus pressed their palms together in pleading. "I bet your mother gushes over your participation trophies too."

Calliope paused when Erato whispered in her ear, then the eldest muse looked back at Ditus. "Very well, we accept." She signaled for her sisters to leave. Then she took the trophy from Erato and handed it to Ditus.

Hymie and Ditus waited until The Muses walked around the corner before bending at the waist and exhaling. Then Hymie scowled at his brothers. "We can't leave you stupid bastards alone for ten minutes!"

Artemis, Iphigenia, and Hedone looked up from the scrying platter when The Muses filed into the restaurant. Their hair, white suits, and matching dresses were smeared in mud and moss, but they didn't seem to care. Calliope strode across the dance floor to Mnemosyne and proudly presented the bag of money to their mother. The Goddess of Memories thanked her girls, then beckoned Hades to pick up another donation.

Hedone returned to the scrying platter and checked on her father's siblings. Ditus and Hymie lounged on the corner bench as they berated their hot-headed brothers.

"Why are you mad at us?" grunted Himeros as he crawled off the patio floor. "They started it." Then he hissed and doubled over again.

Hymie leaned backwards in his seat and propped an ankle on his other knee. "Careful, I'd imagine Calliope-kicks in the crotch would take more healing than usual."

Ditus plucked a twig off Hedylogos' wing. "You should hit a car wash before pulling your wings in."

"No shit." Hedy plopped onto a table. His shoes squished and burped from the mud-mix.

Pothos' eyes snapped open, then he sat straight up. His waterproof shorts were none the worse for wear and wet grass covered the back of his

shirt. "Are the fireworks done?"

"You were out cold for a while." Anteros narrowed his eyes as he noted the lack of bruises on Pothos. "Did Calliope hit you too?"

With a bright grin, Pothos skipped onto the patio and quipped. "Nope, I stayed the hell out of it."

"Figures." Anteros pulled several gold out of his pocket and summoned a cooler filled with beer and ice packs. "You're pure chicken shit, Pothos. You know that?"

Pothos reached into the cooler and grabbed a bottle. "On the contrary, I got to watch your sorry asses get kicked by a wet t-shirt contest. The views were incredible."

After switching to a lawn chair, Himeros pulled a bottle from the cooler and placed it between his legs. There was a chorus of swear words from his siblings to use the damn ice packs. "Hey, there's a beer for every emergency."

"We had everything under control, Hymie. Calliope was almost tapped out. We could've walked away with the trophy, the money, and a clean reputation." Hedylogos wiped the sludge off his cheeks, then flicked away the mess. "Why didn't you just lend us a hand?"

"Because the grapevine will talk no matter what." Ditus hit their muddied brother upside the head. "Would you rather Zeus heard you were beaten up *by* his daughters or that you *beat up* his daughters? Might as well engrave your names on his thunderbolts."

Anteros pressed an ice pack against his swollen face and mumbled. "Forget the money, Hedy. That whole thing was embarrassing. How did those cheeky pom-poms keep fighting without falling over exhausted?"

Ditus gave him a pitying look. "They have this skill called Teamwork, spreads the workload. Might want to try it."

"Bullshit." Anteros finished his beer, tossed it aside, then reached for another. "They were lucky."

"They were also stone-cold sober." Hymie summoned a bottle of near-beer then switched it with the bottle in Anteros' grip. "Not to mention they outnumbered you. If Eros was here, he would've stopped you from leaving the restaurant in the first place. The moment you stepped out the door, was the moment you lost."

Pothos slapped a high-spirited rhythm on the patio table. "Lighten up, guys. At least we still have something to give mother." He held the trophy up to the tiki torch light, revealing fresh scratches in the metallic paint.

FUCK U

Artemis laid a hand on her girlfriend's shoulder. "Okay, we've seen enough. Go ahead and turn it off." With a flick of her wrist, Iphigenia released the spell from the scrying platter and the wine returned to normal. Then Artemis reclined in her chair and studied Hedone. "So, what do you think?"

"I think." Hedone peered across the dance floor where the Nine Muses enjoyed their chocolate and pears tarts. "That it's time I got to know The Muses a little better."

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The story continues in Deal With Cupid...

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If the Muses can be inspired to defy tradition, maybe there is hope for Love.

When approached with a job to save Eros and Psyche's marriage, The Nine Muses aren't convinced they should get involved. Meddling in another immortal's business can lead to chaos, and no one wants to mess with that bitch.

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Dearest Readers,
I hope you're enjoying time with the series, When Muses Misbehave. So far it has been very exciting for me to bring these characters to life. If you have a minute to leave an honest review, it would be most appreciated, not just by me, but by other readers. And don't forget to sign up here for my newsletter at www.lwlowe.com so you will be notified when the next installment will be available.
Thank you so much for your support and may you be inspired,
LW Lowe

About The Author

L. W. Lowe

LW Lowe is the author of the series When Muses Misbehave.

As a kid, she consumed all kinds of sci-fi, fantasy, and paranormal entertainment from books to movies. Then she was gifted a dog-eared copy of The Return of Rafe Mackade, and romance had a new superfan. She currently lives in central Ohio with her husband, wrangling five kids, a cowardly guard dog, and a cat named Fluffy Evil. She wishes Eureka's Global Dynamics was real, thinks Red Dwarf deserves all the fancy-schmancy awards provided they're presented at a wine bar, and prefers her

coffee with hot chocolate bombs.
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